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WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO LOVE AS A COMMUNIST? TO LOVE AS A COMRADE?

BIOPOLITICS FEMINISM, GENDER, LOVE COMMUNISM

This is a modified excerpt from a forthcoming publication of a roundtable discussion with Jules Joanne Gleeson, Andrew Culp, and myself. The full transcript will be able to be found in the forthcoming issue of Identities Journal.

Q. What opportunities does Marxist Feminism offer us for a new sexual politics, or new kinds of love?

I've always thought that one of the key contributions of Marxist Feminism was the framework it offered and one that also affords us new ways of conceiving and understanding the relationship of work to sex, sex to work, and both of these as they relate to love; and all on the basis of how it has been able to deepen the specificity of what exactly a communist politics promises and entails. The example that immediately comes to mind here is Silvia Federici's seminal essay, 'Wages Against Housework.' It is in this essay where Federici makes a comment that appears as nothing but a passing remark; a statement that is less a materialist description and more a declaration regarding just what exactly is entailed and implicitly asserted in the project of bringing about a communist future. So, and in the course of her analysis, Federici writes: '[W]e want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create our sexuality, which we have never known.' Given Federici's insight, and inquiring into the opportunities afforded to us by Marxist Feminism, we could begin by attempting to understand the precise sense in which Federici makes this remark. In other words, is it the case that Federici is implicitly arguing for a view that seeks out the meaning and social relations of love, intimacy, and familial bonds, insofar as they are stripped of their determinations by the social relations of Capital?

However, my suspicion is that the question with which Federici is occupied is one that is as difficult and profound as it is simple and concise: *What would it mean to love as a communist? To love like a comrade, or to love as someone who is in solidarity while simultaneously as someone who loves within a romantic partnership? And finally, what are the modes of loving, both ourselves*

and others, that are made possible only by virtue of communism? This is to inquire into the possibility of an image of communism as one that is irreducible to its being the solution to the riddle of history. So, if what is implied by Federici's remark is that communism is the historical condition upon which questions of love and sexuality can be posed, in its most profound and meaningful manner, then what is potentially discovered within the tradition of Marxist Feminism more generally is a vision of communism as something more than historical resolutions; a communism that was to be the very condition through which the meaning and function of love no longer derives its sense or value through its participation in a time no longer defined as that of labour or of leisure.

And so, regarding the connection between love and the form of time adequate to it, and with respect to Federici's insistence on the political necessity of maintaining a clear separation of the time of work from that of sex/love/life, we catch a glimpse of how this Marxist Feminist analysis of the relationship between production and reproduction are immediately related to Marx's own position on the differing forms of time proper to capitalism and communism. For example, Marx makes a relevant observation in the *Grundrisse* when he writes that: 'For real wealth is developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather *disposable time*' (*Grundrisse*, tr. Nicolaus, London: Penguin, 1973, 708). This disposable-time that is said to be the true measure of the wealth produced under communism; this time with which we can do as we please and that structures one's life as a life defined by this form of time that can only be attributed to communism; this time, then, is the form of time that not only corresponds to Federici's separation of sex from work but does so in a way that moves beyond the brute opposition of labour-time vs. leisure-time (which is simply unwaged time put in the service of reproducing labour-power). In this way, one would be able to see how *disposable-time* is the form of time adequate to communism; as the form of time most adequate for determining the how the questions and experiences of love and sexuality; as the form of time proper for our rediscovery of love, for the creation of sexualities we have never known.

And yet... problems immediately present themselves regarding the position I have just outlined since it is a reading that proposes Federici's insights taken in connection with Marx's comments on disposable-time as a form of time distinct from that of labour- or leisure-time, are important and useful for thinking through possible determinations or meanings regarding the content of expressions of love or sexual relations. However, my above comment is actually an account that responds more to the question of a life determined under communist social relations (i.e. *what are some of the material and symbolic effects of loving relations under a communist society?*) and less to that of sexual lives and love lives formed in the midst of the real movement that abolishes both itself and the present state of affairs (i.e. *what are the relations of love and care required for communism understood as the real, abolishing, movement?*). And, perhaps to make matters worse, I feel myself almost guaranteed to fail at giving anything close to an adequate answer to configurations of sex and love that are contemporary with revolutionary struggle. However, on this question of love and sex in times of struggle, there are at least some examples from past cycles of struggle to which we can return to in light of these questions. And one example that immediately comes to mind is the phenomena that came to be known as 'forest wives' – which was a temporary social relation whose legitimate invocation pertained only to periods of revolutionary struggle, and particularly to the cis-male guerrilla fighters of the Hukbalahap, which served as the armed wing of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP). The phenomena of 'forest wives' is relevant for us insofar as it presents an historical example of how a communist party and its armed wing embarked on devising explicitly communist solutions to the problems that guerrilla's inevitably faced in the countryside and/or jungle (loneliness, alienation, sexual frustration, desire for intimacy with another person, etc.) in light of how best to integrate the desires of its guerrilla cadre: the Hukbalahap (the guerrilla army's full name in Tagalog being 'the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon,' and in English translates as 'the People's Anti-Japanese Liberation Army').

In 1950, the party drafted a document with the title "Revolutionary Solution to the Sex Problem" – and it is in this document that the PKP sought to consider the so-called 'sex problem' (in addition to questions surrounding marriage and family structures) as they were objectively determined by the requirements of an ongoing guerrilla struggle against the Japanese and then later against the United States. Thus, in an effort to begin to think through the relations of sex and love afforded by communism understood as a collective and abolitionist struggle, I would turn our attention to the work of Vina A. Lanzona's, and particularly her significant text, *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion*. It is here that Lanzona's historical research into how questions of sex and gender were treated by the PKP and Huk guerrillas demonstrates at least one possible approach of what sex and love mean in a time of resistance and/or struggle. As Lanzona shows, it was clear that the PKP viewed problems of sex and family life as primarily social in nature as opposed to individual or personal matters. And it is for this reason that the party sought out explicitly social solutions instead of viewing these as the problems that plague bourgeois sentimentalism regarding the betrayal caused by desire and/or private, as opposed to public, matters of the heart:

The policy set out in this document permitted married male guerrillas to have extramarital relationships with single female cadres as long as they followed strict regulations. Claiming "biological necessity," the frustrated male cadre could present his problem to his superiors and...[A]fter an unofficial review he would be allowed to take a forest wife as long as both his legal and forest wives were aware of the arrangement and he agreed to settle down with only one woman at the end of the struggle [...] In their efforts to negotiate relationships between male and female members, party officials moved issues of sex and family from the private to the public realm, weighing the "private" interests and desires of individual cadres in relation to the collective interests of the...movement...personal matters that had once been negotiated solely by individual men and women were now discussed and regulated by the

revolutionary movement. (*Amazons of the Huk Rebellion*, 13-14)

What is evident in the PKP's solution to the 'sex problem' is its inability to (i) critically distance itself from conflating sex with gender and (ii) its ignorance to the way in which sex is labour, and therefore leisure-time is nothing other than unwaged labour-time that acts as another constraint, historically considered, on the material lives of women under capitalist social relations. Such is a position taken by Jeff Goodwin in his essay on the libidinal-economy of the Huk Rebellion. As Goodwin writes, it would turn out to be the case that the PKP's official response in legitimizing of relations between cis-male guerrilla fighters and their 'forest wife' counterparts culminated in a situation whereby the very 'affectual ties' outlined by the party ultimately 'eroded the solidarity of this...movement. The libidinal constitution (i.e., the structure and "economy" of the affectual ties) of the Huk movement's [sic] predominantly male activists...undermined their collective identity and discipline' (Goodwin, 53). However, despite these blind spots the significant contribution we are forced to acknowledge and as outlined in the "Revolutionary Solution to the Sex Problem" is the attempt made at resolving problems that arise within relations of sex and love from a decidedly materialist standpoint. Materialist, because despite its shortcomings the PKP occupied the position that began from the admission that both the essence of, and material basis for, problems arising within relations of sex and love are products of a process that is equally historical and material. In other words, the problems posed by sex and love are fundamentally social and not individual because the social relations that govern how we have sex and love ourselves/others are determined, in the last instance, by the fact that the social relations of capital are simultaneously gendered.

All of this to qualify my initial answer in order to make the following clear: if what we understand by communism is the real movement of abolition, and if what we are asking when we inquire into what communism makes possible for the life of desire, then the example of the PKP's 'revolutionary solution' to the so called 'sex problem' is important. And equally with respect to the PKP's framework which lead it to understand that it is of the nature of problems to be social and political prior to being private and individual; additionally, it was due to the PKP's understanding of the lasting effects of colonization (Spain) and imperialism (United States) that their framework implicitly asserted the claim that problems are generated out of historical and material processes and produce specific *gendered* social relations that also function as what determines the particular problems of sex, love, and family life for all individuals under the gendered social relations constituted by, and constitutive of, a life lived according to the dictates of capital's *raison d'être* (i.e., the development *ad infinitum* of both the means and relations of production placed at the service of satisfying the obsession that lies at the heart of capital's logical self-development: the continuation of primitive accumulation and unemployment as guarantees for the existence of a global reserve army of labour as well as the existence of lucrative nation-states for the realization of value and therefore a guarantee for one more revolution around the globe for value-creation). In other words, if anything is to be taken from the PKP's "Revolutionary Solution to the Sex Problem", it is more historical than practically useful. And it's historical significance lies in the fact of this party document that renders coherent a relationship between sex, love, and family life vis-a-vis what is required by a period of struggle, whose grounds and conclusions presage what would come to define the values and discoveries made by the second wave (white-European) of feminist movement. Lastly, it is a document that serves as a clear example whereby official party meetings and discussions dedicated *time* in order to develop a thoroughgoing understanding regarding the social nature of problems, and thus how personal or private matters are always matters that concern the whole of society. If anything remains revolutionary in this party document it is to have avoided, as early as 1950, the false problems/debates that would arise and that would lead some elements of the Left to view questions regarding 'identities' (and specifically gender and sexual identity) as having nothing but a divisive consequence for the overall unity of the proletariat as the agent that determines the outcomes of the real and abolishing movement against the present.

To make matters worse, this missed opportunity is doubly painful since its failure to remain faithful to an intersectional analysis of the party's own present translated into the party's failure to realize and articulate a particular kind of relationship between communism and gender established by what is common to both: *Abolition*. So to bring this rambling comment to a close, and from within the present conjuncture, it is only by relating communism to notions of sex, love, and gender through the category of *abolition* that the questions of '*What it would mean to love as a communist?*' and '*To love as a comrade?*' move beyond the limitations of the PKP as well as forecloses any possible legitimacy of positions supported by TERFs when speaking of communist politics. And since Jules has already articulated how abolition serves as the vanishing mediator between communism and questions of sex, love, and gender I will simply end with what her own words towards the end of an essay entitled 'The Call for Gender Abolition: From Materialist Lesbianism to Gay Communism':

Trans womanhood in this respect constitutes womanhood existing in its own right, and against the wishes of a considerable body accustomed to the prevailing heterosexual order. Politically, this can be a point of pride. Our inability to bear children is cited by traditionalists and radical feminist 'abolitionists' alike as grounds to disqualify us from womanhood, demonstrating at once the fixing and fragility of womanhood as a sex class. For as long as women remain often defined by their relationship to biological reproduction, trans women can only be considered inadequate imitations. Abolishing womanhood, as defined by Wittig, could be furthered by inclusion of trans women in that category as currently constituted. If co-existence can not be achieved, abolition is inevitable.

This struggle will surely be a refiguring and visceral one, challenging and overcoming arbitrary demarcations in embodiment through diverse and unrelenting means (surfacing in hospitals, street corners and bed rooms). In reclaiming this abolitionary drive towards unchecked expressiveness, revolutionary trans feminism has much to learn

from the gay communist and materialist lesbian traditions.

taken from there

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